

New judge fulfilling dreams of his parents

By LILA FUJIMOTO, Staff Writer

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WAILUKU – As he was sworn in Friday as the newest 2nd Circuit judge, Richard Bissen gave credit to his late parents for a career that has included positions as deputy prosecutor, Maui County prosecuting attorney and state public safety director.

“I don’t know how often it is that a child is able to live the dreams that their parents had dreamt for them, but I am that child,” Bissen said. “It was the encouragement and support of my parents that have allowed me to do a lot of things throughout my career and my life.”

For Bissen’s swearing-in ceremony Friday afternoon, the Maui County Council Chambers overflowed with family members, as well as current and former co-workers, including state Attorney General Mark Bennett, judges, attorneys, sheriff’s deputies and police officers.

Royal Order of Kamehameha members, including former Maui Mayor James “Kimo” Apana, were in the audience, along with former secretaries and members of Bissen’s study group at the University of Hawaii’s William S. Richardson School of Law.

While praised for his work ethic and legal skills, Bissen, 43, was also lauded for his quick wit and sense of humor.

Gov. Linda Lingle nominated Bissen for the newly created fourth 2nd Circuit judgeship. He joins 2nd Circuit Chief Judge Shackley Raffetto, who presided over the ceremony for Chief Justice Ronald Moon, and 2nd Circuit Judges Joseph Cardoza and Joel August.

As Lingle read the official announcement of Bissen’s 10-year term, which runs through April 28, 2015, she noted that the official document contrasted with Bissen’s personality. “He is a person respectful of authority, of course, but not a very formal person,” she said.

As Maui mayor, Lingle first appointed Bissen to be Maui County prosecuting attorney in 1995. He served in that position until January 2003, when Lingle – newly elected as governor – appointed him to be first deputy in the state Department of the Attorney General. Last November, Lingle selected Bissen to head the state Department of Public Safety, overseeing a state prison system struggling with overcrowding and understaffing.

During her administrations, both as mayor and governor, Lingle said Bissen was “a favorite of Cabinet members.”

“When things would get real serious, he would somehow lighten it up with a joke or a funny line,” she said.

She described Bissen as someone “who did his work with a seriousness of purpose but never

took himself too seriously.”

Lingle referred to the rough confirmation process Bissen went through before his nomination was approved in February.

“By the time Rick was finished with these grueling Senate hearings, everyone knew what kind of a person he was and the strength of his character,” Lingle said.

Second Circuit Judge Joseph Cardoza said he was impressed with Bissen from the time about 25 years ago when the St. Anthony High School student shadowed Cardoza, who was then a Maui County deputy prosecutor, to learn about the legal profession.

Cardoza was head prosecutor when he hired Bissen as a deputy in 1987.

“Judge Bissen went on to become one of the most successful trial attorneys in the state and was often called upon to teach other attorneys on a national level,” Cardoza said.

Richard Turbin, president of the Hawaii State Bar Association, said Bissen “brought much-needed aloha into Hawaii’s legal profession.”

Turbin said he wished he had been in the state Supreme Court courtroom when Bissen delivered his first speech as first deputy attorney general.

Instead of the long, boring talk that people were expecting, Bissen “broke into a cappella verse” to sing “Greatest Love of All,” Turbin said.

“What a soulful and eloquent way to describe the responsibilities of a public servant,” Turbin said.

Before Bissen spoke, his cousin Keawe’aimoku Kaholokula delivered a chant in Hawaiian of the family genealogy.

Bissen said his wife, Isabella, “was really the strength in our family” during the confirmation process.

“Women have played a dominant role in who I am today,” he said. “I have three sisters, three daughters. I have been appointed to five different positions by Governor Lingle. My mom was my biggest influence and, yeah, even my dog is female.”

Bissen agreed with Cardoza that his parents “are probably here now in spirit.”

“I’m certain my mom is saying to my dad, ‘Eh, Papa, I think we did well,’ “ Bissen said. “And, of course, my dad is saying, ‘What you said?’ pretending to not hear.”

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